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ABSTRACT

This action research study, carried out by two university professors in a Texas teacher education institution, examined the beliefs and self-images of preservice teachers as they related to writing and the teaching of writing. It also examined what course elements and activities could contribute to the development of positive attitudes and beliefs related to writing and writing instruction. The research study was based on delivery a new course, some of which was still in the planning phase, on the development of written communication. Student teachers were observed as they participated in writing workshops and were surveyed for data collection. Follow-up focus group interviews were also conducted. Data analysis indicate that many of the preservice teachers did not perceive themselves as writers, and they tended to lack confidence in their own writing abilities. Students indicated that most of the assignments and experiences provided during the course contributed positively to their development of confidence and attitude toward writing. The students considered feedback the most influential aspect of the course. (Contains 32 references.) (SM)

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ED 466 470

Teachers of Writing as Writers: Examining Attitudes and Informing Practice through Action Research

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Presented to the annual meeting of the

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Abstract

This paper describes an action research study carried out by two university professors in a Texas teacher education institution. The purpose of the study was to examine the beliefs and self-images of preservice teachers as they relate to writing and the teaching of writing. Specifically, the professors engaged in the action research study while in the planning and delivery stages of a new course in the development of written communication. The professors investigated the attitudes and beliefs of their students, finding that many of the preservice teachers did not perceive themselves as writers and lacked confidence in their own writing abilities. Further investigation identified course elements that were supportive of positive attitude development and increases in levels of confidence. The information gained through the action research was used to guide course development.

Experts in the field of reading and writing research agree that in order for teachers to be effective, they must be readers and writers themselves (Draper, 2000: Graves, 1994; Calkins, 1994). Experts in the field of teaching writing also agree that, in order to be effective, teachers must write with their students, modeling, demonstrating, and sharing the writing process (Graves, 1994; Calkins, 1994). This study explores this aspect of teaching writing by examining preservice teachers' views of themselves as writers.

Graves (1994), found that few adult Americans use writing in their everyday lives and that few had "witnessed the power of writing as demonstrated by their teachers" (p. 155). Bowie (1996) found that when teachers are not confident in their own writing ability they feel inadequate to teach writing. In many cases teachers' negative attitudes toward writing seem to come from previous writing experiences (Draper, Barksdale-Ladd, & Radencich, 2000; Richardson, 1992; Phillips, 1992). Calkins (1994) stressed, based on extensive experience and research in writing classrooms, that teachers do not necessarily need to perceive themselves as writers or need to write on a daily basis in order to effectively teach writing. More important was the need for teachers to have experienced the "power of writing" at least once in their lives and be able to draw on that experience in order to teach (p.13). Our goal, in this project, was to develop a course in which the pedagogical knowledge basic to the teaching of writing would be delivered and demonstrated, while also giving preservice teachers the opportunity to experience personal success with writing.

Although there is extensive research in the area of teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward reading (Cramer & Blanchowicz, 1980; DeFord, 1985; Mueller, 1973; Scott, J.E., 1985; Searls, E.F., 1985), and in the area of writing apprehension (Daly & Miller, 1975;

Faigley, 1981; Miller, 1979), there is less published research related to teachers' attitudes toward writing. Because experts in the field of the teaching of writing emphasize the importance of teacher participation in the writing process, this area of inquiry is of value to teacher educators in the field of literacy.

Hoffman and Pearson (2000) described the paucity of research in the area of teacher education in literacy. They stressed that teacher educators in the field of literacy must take a leadership role in researching the contexts, goals, and priorities of their work. Teachers, at all levels, are currently finding themselves being asked to demonstrate accountability to a variety of stakeholders for the policies and practices employed in their classrooms. Teachers are expected to make informed, data-driven decisions; they can no longer rely on professional judgment alone to make decisions regarding instructional practice (Pearson, 2001). Action research provides a means through which teachers can document and evaluate instructional decisions. Through this research project, we engaged in ongoing questioning and systematic examination of practice, which is currently guiding the development of curriculum.

Context

This action research study focused on a new course, The Development of Written Communication. The course was created as part of a total program restructuring in response to new teacher education standards for the state of Texas (State Board for Educator Certification, 2002). Initial planning for the course centered on the successful model of professional development used by the National Writing Project (NWP) since 1974. The NWP model is based on the beliefs that teachers are the key to education reform, teachers make the best teachers of other teachers, and teachers benefit from

studying and conducting research. Key assumptions of the NWP incorporated in our course included the ideas that effective teachers of writing regularly write themselves and exemplary teachers make the best teachers of other teachers.

Elements of the course created in response to these assumptions are delineated in Table 1.

Table 1

National Writing Project Assumptions and Corresponding Course Elements

Assumptions of the NWP Model	Course Element
Teachers make the best teachers of other teachers.	Craft lessons – focused minilessons using quality children's literature based on the book by Fletcher and Portalupi (1998) taught in a microteaching format Professor modeling of the writing process
Effective teachers of writing write regularly.	Writer's notebook based on Fletcher (1996) Writing process: Personal narrative assignment Modeling of personal writing by the professor
Teachers benefit from studying and conducting research.	Writing process: Investigations of "burning questions" through inquiry based projects, resulting in research reports Modeling of the research process through action research

The course, Development of Written Communication, was first taught in the fall semester of 2000. During this semester, we administered an open-ended Writing Survey (Atwell, 1998) to all students in the course. Our purpose, initially, in administering this survey was to model for preservice teachers one of the many types of assessments

instruments teachers use to guide instruction. However, through reviewing the results of these surveys, we began to notice a large number of preservice teachers whose responses indicated negative attitudes toward writing and themselves as writers. These observations led to the formulation of specific research questions.

Questions and Methodology

This study was conducted as a collaborative action research inquiry. In the process of action research, teachers attempt to increase knowledge and improve practice through trying out and examining ideas in practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982). The questions framing this research were: 1) What attitudes and beliefs do preservice teachers hold concerning the writing process and themselves as writers? 2) What course elements and activities, if any, can contribute to the development of positive attitudes and beliefs related to writing and the teaching of writing?

The methodology of this study was derived from the action research cycle (Kemmis &McTaggart, 1988). The cycle consists of three stages: plan, act and observe, and reflect. This cycle is then repeated in a spiraling fashion, with reflection leading to a revised plan, which is then observed in action, and reflected upon. The stages of this cycle in our project are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Action Research Cycle

Semester	Phase in Action Research Cycle	Research task
Summer 2000 (Pat as Course Director)	Plan	Plan new course based on NWP principles
Fall 2000 (Course taught by Pat and Jan) Spring 2001 (Course taught by Jan. Jan assumes Course Director role.)	Observe and Reflect	Observe students' reactions to course elements and attitudes toward writing Observation: Pre-course survey shows that about half of the preservice teachers enrolled hold negative attitudes.
Fall 2001 (Course taught by Jan)	Act	Administer Atwell survey as pre and post instrument to determine if experiences within the course changed student attitudes toward the positive.
Spring 2002 (Course taught by Jan, interviews conducted by Pat)	Plan Observe and reflect	Conduct focus group interviews with students' whose surveys indicated positive attitude change. Investigate which course elements contributed to this change. Plan changes to course based on survey results
Fall 2002	Act	Implement change in course. Continue to monitor attitudes through surveys and focus group interviews.

The first cycle of this spiral began with the planning of the new course, Development of Written Communication. During the first two semesters of delivery, we observed the students as they participated in writing workshop (Atwell (1994), Calkins (1998), Graves (1994), Ray (1999). Through this observation, we began to question our

effectiveness in providing for students experiences in which they would feel successful and would experience the "power of writing" (Graves, 1994, p. 155).

The initial data were collected from sixty-one elementary education students. Results of these surveys were entered into the qualitative analysis program, *Nudist Vivo.* Data were coded and categorized using the constant comparison method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and detailed by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). Based on the survey data, purposive sampling was used in the selection of students to participate in follow-up interviews. Invitations to participate in the focus groups were issued to twelve students. The purpose of these interviews was to further examine the current course elements from an attitudinal perspective. Students were selected based on survey responses that indicated a change toward positive habits and attitudes related to writing. Six students attended interview sessions. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted to insure that all interviewees were asked the same questions while allowing for open-ended discussion related to the research questions. Interviews were transcribed into *Nudist Vivo*, read by researchers, and coded for common themes and categories. Additional sources for triangulation of data included writing samples from preservice teachers, professors' field notes regarding interactions with students, and notes from course planning meetings.

Findings

Research Question 1: What attitudes and beliefs do preservice teachers hold concerning the writing process and themselves as writers?

Answers to two questions, numbers 1 and 9, from the Writing Survey (Atwell, 1998) administered at the beginning of the semester were examined in relation to this question. As stated above, this survey was not initially selected for administration as part

of the action research project. The survey was designed to give a teacher a general picture of students as writers, and only these two questions directly related to the research questions. Survey question number 1 simply asked "Are you a writer?" Answers to this question indicated that only 39% of the preservice teachers clearly viewed themselves as writers. The remaining 61% answered either "no" or with an answer indicating uncertainty, such as "yes and no," or "sometimes."

Table 3

Answers to Atwell Writing Survey, Question 1

Question 1	Yes	No	Other (examples: sometimes, yes/no)
Are you a writer?	24 (39%)	27 (45%)	10 (16%)

The second survey question examined, number 9, asked, "In general, how do you feel about what you write?" Answers to this question varied from one word to a paragraph in length. The answers were first coded as Positive, Negative, or Neutral. Fifty- seven percent (35 students) responded negatively to this question. These answers were then transcribed into the qualitative analysis program *Nudist Vivo* and coded for emerging themes describing the negative attitudes. The original twelve codes that emerged from open coding were then reexamined. From this analysis we found that students' negative attitudes fell into three general categories. These were 1) statements indicating a general negative attitude toward the student's own writing, 2) statements indicating insecurity or lack of confidence in writing ability, and 3) statements indicating dissatisfaction with ability related to either content or writing conventions. Examples of these statements are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Coding of Negative Answers to Atwell Survey Question 9: In general, how do you feel about what you write?

Coding Category	Example
General negativity	• I am usually not happy with what I write. • I don't really like what I write. • I don't like the way I write.
Lack of confidence/insecurity	• I never have much confidence in my writing. • I am confident about my writing, but not enough to share it with others. • I am very insecure about my writings.
Dissatisfaction with ability (content or conventions)	Content: • I feel as though I ramble. • It is random. Only I understand it. • It's just difficult for me to arrange my thoughts on paper where the words flow and make sense. Conventions • I'm worried about my grammar and how it will sound. • I'm terrible at grammar. • I get my mother to proof for me (English teacher for 27 yrs.) and she changes a lot of things, mainly my punctuation. I am not always sure where commas go.

Research Question 2: What course elements and activities, if any, can contribute to the development of positive attitudes and beliefs related to writing and the teaching of writing?

Answers to Questions 1 and 9 in the end-of-course survey were compared to answers in the pre-course survey for evidence of changes in attitude. Sixteen students from the original pool of sixty-one were identified as having attitude shifts toward the positive during the course of the semester. Twelve of these students were still enrolled in

the undergraduate program and were invited to participate in the focus group interviews. Of these twelve students invited, six participated. We hypothesize that participation may have been reduced by the fact that some students were participating in student teaching or internships at relatively remote locations. A second contributing factor may have been that the interviews were conducted during the days prior to and immediately following Spring Break.

During the interview sessions, students were asked to comment on their current attitudes toward writing and the teaching of writing. They were then asked to reflect on the course, The Development of Written Communication, identifying the elements of the course that were most beneficial to them in effecting a change in attitude toward writing and those elements that they felt were least beneficial. Transcripts from the two interviews were entered into *Nudist Vivo.* Selective coding was used to identify attitudes and opinions related to the course elements designed around the NWP principles and assumptions.

Course Elements

Writer's Notebook

The Writer's Notebook (Fletcher, 1996) was assigned for two purposes. Preservice teachers were expected to write in the notebook several times each week. These brief writing experiments were intended to be "seeds" for longer pieces of work, specifically the personal narrative assignment. Students teaching craft lessons (Fletcher & Portalupi, 1998) to the class could also request that participants write entries in their notebooks. The Writer's Notebook, according to Fletcher, is "a place to live like a writer, not just in school during writing time, but wherever you are, at any time of day" (p. 3).

Our hope, in assigning the notebook, was that preservice teachers would view it as a way in which they and their future students could live the lives of writers. This course element received mixed reviews from the interview participants. Three former students stated that the Writer's Notebook was the most beneficial part of the course. Donna summed up the discussion of Writer's Notebook in one interview session by saying

> It built my confidence. It changed the way, when I walked outside, the way that I looked at things because I was going to write it down. So when I looked at the tree, I learned to look at the bird in the tree. [Dr. Lacina] made us open our eyes to the little things. Like I think it was in the reading about the guy who walked down the same road with his little girl and then one day he saw the car that was in the pasture and it had been there the whole time. You just start looking at things differently. That journal gave me a lot of confidence (Interview Transcript 2, lines 77-83).

Speaking from a different perspective, Jessica identified the Writer's Notebook as the only course element that negatively impacted her attitude toward writing. She and the other participants from the first focus group commented on the requirement to write in the notebook four times each week.

> The writer's notebook was a good idea but I think saying how many entries you have to have is not. [Other two participants agree]. Sometimes you're like I've got something I really want to write about and some days you sit down and go.... because you couldn't really make it like a diary it needed to be like explaining something and so that was the only thing. . . I feel like it was contradicting me trying to learn to like to write. (Transcript 1, lines 38-53).

However, in conversations concerning their current involvement in teaching writing during student teaching, two of these participants listed Writer's Notebook as one of the course elements they chose to implement in their own classrooms (Transcript 1, lines 26-27and 69-70).

Modeling

Throughout both interview sessions, modeling by the professor was mentioned repeatedly as a factor that contributed to positive attitude change.

> When we had a problem you knew you could turn to your neighbor and they would listen to you and Dr. Lacina provided for us an example in herself and her behavior of how to talk to each other. She modeled it very effectively. We felt more open because she showed us how to give feedback kindly and effectively. Critical and positive and every aspect to help you move with your writing. (Transcript 2, lines 74-80)

Other students found confidence through the examples of quality children's literature presented in class through the modeling of lessons.

> She would talk to us like we were elementary kids. She'd say, "See this." And I would think, I can write that book. That was probably my favorite thing. I had never even thought about going, "Hey, here's a good book," and using it as an example (Transcript 1, lines 30-32)

> Now I go and find a book that's got an example in it. I think using others writer's words helps a lot. That's what changed my mind. You can even go back in my journal that I keep every night and tell that I put more into it without even thinking about it. Just noticing things because of the books (Transcript 1, lines 72-76).

In both interview sessions, professor modeling through sharing of her own writing was mentioned as helpful and confidence building. Both interview groups recalled an example when Jan used her military identification card to model a Writer's Notebook entry in which she discussed her feelings about the label "dependent." At other times, Jan shared stories of her personal movement through the writing process through discussing our research project and other writing projects underway.

In addition to modeling by the professor, preservice teachers were expected to model lessons for each other. These lessons were based on examples from the book, Craft

Lessons by Fletcher and Portalupi (1998). This assignment was designed to provide the college students with the simulated experience of teachers teaching other teachers, a principle adopted from the National Writing Project. Three interview participants listed these craft lessons, as being particularly helpful in building positive attitudes toward writing instruction.

Personal narrative and research project

In addition to weekly entries in the Writer's Notebook, these two major assignments were designed to give preservice teachers personal experience with the types of writing assignments most commonly expected in elementary and middle school curriculums. While perceptions of the difficulty of these two assignments varied among the interview participants, both assignments were perceived as valuable experiences in building positive attitudes toward writing and the teaching of writing. During the focus group session, Linda contributed these comments concerning the research assignment:

> I have a very positive attitude about writing. I just finished a research paper in both of my communication classes and actually helped other students in the class with their paper. I just had to think if they had gone to the [writing] class it would be easy for them. I saw some of the difficulties that they were having and they were some of the same questions that I had when I first started doing my research paper (Transcript 2, lines 44-48).

Reflecting on the writing of the personal narrative, Donna commented:

> Frankly building my confidence as a writer came from that first children's book, the narrative piece. That helped so much. I got so into my topic and so interested in doing it and doing it well. When I got finished [Dr. Lacina] had such a positive response to what I wrote that it really made me think I can do this. How she responded, where she talked about her response, and the positive things and the critical in a positive way (Transcript 2, lines 26-30).

Feedback

It was interesting, and confirming to find that all of the course elements we planned for this course were viewed positively by at least half of the students. However, what emerged from the interview transcripts as most influential in changing attitudes towards writing was intermingled with the sections selectively coded according to the course elements. Again and again, throughout both focus groups, the word feedback was mentioned. Feedback, from peers and professor, was mentioned forty-four times within the two interview transcripts. Linda summed up these comments when she stated

> Sometimes I know that I feel alone when I am writing something, pouring out the -. And I think in class the atmosphere was one where it wasn't scary to write or say what you wanted to in that class. About what you were writing or what you were thinking even. The discussions that we had with Jan and then the peer conferences that we had. It helped, I think, everybody feel, not like we were just alone. We shared and helped each other and for me that was the biggest part (Transcript 2, lines 58-65).

During the first focus group, Ashley mentioned how important feedback was to the students in her mentor teacher's classroom. She was asked where her understanding of the importance of feedback had developed.

> It happened in that class. Because any paper I'd ever written before or journals I'd written before I'd never gotten feedback on it and it makes you think what's the point. When we would write something in that class and you'd get it back within, I mean we would have it back the next day or over the weekend we'd have it back. I think its kind of putting yourself in the students' shoes. The class made me feel like I was an elementary student (Transcript 1, lines 84-88).

Some students stated that written feedback from the professor was most helpful to them in building positive attitudes. Jessica commented

> Written feedback. Because when you're at home you can go back and look over what she said. If I might be having a bad day I might pull that journal out and read that comment and that just makes me feel good about myself when I'm maybe discouraged about writing something. That makes sense (Transcript 1, lines 98-101).

Jessica then continued to comment on the peer conferences conducted during the writing workshop portion of the course.

> And then I think when I had a peer review those were very helpful. The fact that we had peers encouraging as well as professors you know, oh this is what I like about that piece. I've never thought about having a peer review (Transcript 1, lines 101-104)

Throughout the writing of the personal narrative, peer conferences were used as the primary means of feedback to the preservice teachers. Conferences with the professor were available, but were optional. All three students in the second focus group had taken advantage of these optional conferences, however, two members of the first focus group had not. Individual conferences were required during the writing of the research reports. Jennifer commented on her feelings of anxiety about the earlier narrative assignment

> Jennifer: I turned it in and got a really good grade on it and I was totally shocked. I didn't know what to expect and I didn't know what I was supposed to be doing and so it was kind of like a shot in the dark.
>
> Pat: So if you had some feedback given to you and you knew you were doing well you wouldn't have had so much anxiety?
>
> Jennifer: Uh hum [indicating agreement] (Transcript 1, lines 28-35).

Later Jennifer commented on the writing of the research paper.

> The reason I was more comfortable [with the research assignment] was it was the end of the semester and I did know more of what [Dr. Lacina] was expecting (Transcript 1, lines 84-84).

Several students commented that it was through these individual conferences that they were able to move away from writing for the professor towards writing for themselves. Ashley stated

> I would take my paper to her and say what do you think about this? And she would say just go ahead and write it. Get all you thoughts together and write it down.
>
> I think sometimes [elementary students] feel like they are writing for you. I never felt like that when I was actually in here writing it for myself. [Dr. Lacina] said go ahead and write it down and I'll talk to you about it (Transcript 1, lines .17-26).

Consistently, throughout both interview transcripts, the conclusion emerged that, while the planning of course elements was important in allowing students to experience success with writing, what was of primary importance was the personal interaction with other writers, including the professor. Following the second focus interview, our conversation continued into the hallway. Someone asked if anyone could say exactly where their "rotten" attitude had come from. A chorus of, "Yes!" and "*I* can!" followed. All three students could name the class and the teacher from which their insecurities developed. It may be that in order to counteract these past experiences with a specific teacher, it may take a very positive interaction with another specific teacher.

Discussion

By using the survey data to examine preservice teachers' self-concepts concerning writing, we discovered that many in our program do have negative self-perceptions of their writing ability. Many of them are insecure and lack confidence in their own ability to write. After analyzing the pre-course and post-course survey data we found that the experiences provided in the course, Development of Written Communication, did contribute to a positive change in attitude for some of these students. Our task over the next few semesters will be to seek ways to insure larger numbers of our students leave the course having experienced success with writing at least once in their lives (Calkins, 1994).

From the examination of course elements through the interview data, we learned that most of the assignments and experiences provided to the preservice teachers were viewed, by the students interviewed, as contributing positively to the development of confidence and attitude toward writing. Only the Writer's Notebook was viewed as being a negative contribution, and this viewpoint was held by half of the students interviewed. The difference seemed to be that the three students who viewed the Writer's Notebook positively understood the intent of the assignment. All three took seed ideas from their notebooks as the basis for their personal narratives. The other three students did not seem to make this connection. They focused, instead, on the required number of entries. In future semesters we plan to focus more on what kinds of "visions" students have for creating drafts from the ideas contained in their Writer's Notebooks (Calkins, 1991). Talking and envisioning writing, even before words are put on paper will now be emphasized throughout the writing process of both major assignments, the narrative and the research project. We must be sure that the Writer's Notebook assignment is not seen as busy work, but is understood as a repository of ideas for future drafts, and as an experience in living what Fletcher (1996) called the "writing kind of life" (p. 2).

Because feedback emerged as the most influential aspect of the Development of Written Communication course, we will, in future semesters, schedule individual conferences with all students during the process of writing both major pieces. The students who indicated the most confidence and enjoyment in the narrative writing assignment all had participated in the optional conferences with Jan. Students who did not choose this option indicated more uneasiness regarding this project. For the most part, university students have spent a lifetime in school learning to please teachers. Through

these conferences, we hope to emphasize writing for personal reasons rather than to please an instructor. We also hope to eliminate the uneasiness that Jennifer described as "a shot in the dark." These individual conferences can also contribute to building the explicit link between the Writer's Notebook assignment and the writing of the personal narrative. In conferencing, we have always focused on asking questions rather than giving advice. In the narrative writing conferences we will focus on "envisioning" questions. Examples are: "What is your seed idea?" and "How do you think you might go about writing that?" (Ray, 1999, pp. 50). Conferencing with students throughout the writing process is important. From this action research project we discovered just how important this personal feedback was to our former students.

In addition to these changes in the delivery of course elements, we now see a need to investigate further the personal beliefs and attitudes held by our own faculty members. Our goal is to produce teachers who can demonstrate the "power of writing" to their students, through instruction and modeling. From this research we see that many of our preservice teachers have yet to have that experience themselves. From this study, we learned the importance of writing with our students, modeling the writing process as we go. If we believe that positive attitudes and confidence are important attributes of effective writing teachers, then it is necessary for us to provide professors who possess these attributes themselves. Since the course, Development of Written Communication, was first taught in Fall, 2000, seven different instructors and professors have taught the course. Jan is the only professor who has consistently taught the course from its inception. In future semesters we plan to investigate the beliefs held by teachers of writing within our own department.

The data collected in this action research study was derived from students in only two professor's classes (Jan and Pat), and we both write regularly. We have positive attitudes toward writing. We believe in the power writing can have. It is our conclusion that if we want to supply teachers for tomorrow who have positive attitudes and beliefs and who see themselves as writers, we must continue to strive to provide opportunities for success. All of our students need opportunities to build confidence, and opportunities to experience that power for themselves, in the hope that they can then share it with the writers of tomorrow. We are finding success with a few. We must strive to reach them all.

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